

Lent 2

St. Brendan's Anglican Church

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18, Psalm 27, Philippians 3:17–4:1, Luke 13:22–35

Isaac Bradshaw

On the BBC, there is a wonderful little program called Room 101. If you know the name, it's because Room 101 is a reference to George Orwell's *1984*; it is a room in which hated things are sent to be punished or tortured for their misdeeds, including Winston, the protagonist.

In the show, various celebrities and public figures are interviewed by English comedian Frank Skinner, and they are interviewed on the various pet peeves that are sent to Room 101. For example, Harry Hill, another comedian, wanted to put ice cream trucks into Room 101, since he they play the song Turkey in the Straw over and over and they ruin people's dinner. Famously, a guest tried to put CNN host Piers Morgan into Room 101, but Room 101 itself rejected Morgan as being too toxic.

So what would you put into Room 101?

I'll tell you what I'd put in it. The phrase, "spiritual journey." Blech. Its so whispy and... beige... The sort of thing you'd see on a piece of wall art in Hobby Lobby... "Let's all go on a... spiritual journey of voyaging and self-discovery..."

Blech.

Here's what a spiritual journey is... Some of you may remember the movie Eat Pray Love... In which Julia Roberts takes a year off to go on a "spiritual journey" to go find her self, whatever that means, and she decides to go to Italy and eat pasta and go off to India and eat philosophy and to Bali to have a fling with Javier Bardem and learn to love herself. It's terrible. It reminds me of the old joke about the man who takes a journey to see a guru at the top of a mountain the himalayas, see this guru and says, "Lama! I have come all this way to find who I truly am! And the guru takes a polaroid of the guy and says, "Here. That's who you are."

When I was about to leave Samoa, I was casting around for a job, and found a sailing school... now this was neat, it was a school that was on a tall ship, and they took seniors and juniors on a 12-month voyage back and forth across the Atlantic, keeping up with a full course of high school classes. A great idea and something I would love to do one day.

But I found a blog... of a teacher who kept describing it as her "spiritual journey..." Now, I know that various people have spiritualities that are different than mine, and that's fine, but... When you tell me that the universe has gifted you a rock on the beach in the shape of a heart, and the universe is telling you that it loves you... Blech.

The universe is not telling you that it loves you! It's telling you that millions of years of heat and pressure and destruction and erosion and wind and water have crossed your path, it's not a declaration of love, it's a caution... That you are just as insignificant compared to the forces of the universe.

And this is fine. This is totally cool with me. Because Christians don't do 'spiritual journeys.' We do pilgrimages.

Now, you would think that is a distinction without a difference. But a pilgrim version of Eat, Pray, Love would be a completely different story... Instead of eating pasta across Rome and driving Vespas and engaging the worst form of consumerism, perhaps Julia Roberts could fast, pursuing the path of self-denial instead of self-fulfillment. And maybe spend some time actually praying, engaging in a spirituality that pours out the self instead of being the self-referential center of the universe. And actually love others as Christ loved us with self-sacrificial love, healing the sick, casting out the demons of oppression and economic injustice, instead of simply seeing a sexual conquest in a foreign country. Going past the staring into the Polaroid of our own face, looking outward towards the service of others.

Today, millions of people will drink green beer, eat corned beef and cabbage, and wear green stuff and pretend to be Irish, all as part of celebrating the feast of St. Patrick. I would hate to hear what St. Patrick, an escaped slave who returned to his slavers to preach the Gospel, would make of all this sort of stuff. May be he'd send us all to Croagh Patrick, a mountain where tradition states the saint fasted and prayed for 40 days. On Reek Sunday in July, pilgrims climb the mountain, some barefoot, to pray in the place where Patrick prayed

Or maybe he'd send us off to the island of Lough Dergh, another Irish pilgrimage site, in operation for nearly 1500 years. Pilgrims start their first night by staying up praying all night, breaking their fast with a single simple meal of black tea, oatcakes and dry toast. Anciently, pilgrims fasted for 15 days, made confession and received communion, then locked in a cave for 24 hours, and... this important... If found alive the next day... Were permitted to return to the mainland to fast for another 15 days..

Our maybe he'd send us on our way to Jerusalem, taking the old pilgrim's route to Istanbul, Aleppo, and Damascus, before setting foot in the Holy City. Of course, today we can skip the hard part, settling into a long-haul flight moving at speeds and safety that St. Patrick could never comprehend.

Because, you see, the spiritual journey folks aren't entirely wrong, and maybe I was being a little cranky earlier. Journeys and travels DO change us, we come into contact people who alter our perception of the world, events force us to adapt and evolve, new information and new experiences find us.

But the reality is that our physical pilgrimage in no way endangers us; we are not necessarily at risk of being waylaid by bandits or our ship sinking or overrun with disease and the plague.

So while we don't have the physical dilemmas of physical pilgrimage, we've saddled ourselves with the spiritual dilemmas... of confusing "spiritual journey" with pilgrimage, of using voyage and our bend towards the spiritual towards unspiritual and self-directed ends. This, I would argue, is as serious a threat to us as banditry and storms and plague.

As Christians, our clearest map and compass remains the example of those who have followed before. Philippians enjoins us to follow the example of Paul, himself following the self-sacrificial model of Jesus Christ... of healing and exorcising, of challenging and standing firm against the “old fox” of the political powers that seek to destroy life, corrupt the good and praise the evil.

After all, once warned of Herod’s plot to kill him, Jesus does not go on a voyage of self-discovery of find out how the threat will affect his psyche, or to discover that really, Herod just needs to learn to love himself and everything will be ok.. Jesus stands still. Tells Herod exactly what he will be doing, and ignores Herod’s pitiful attempts to overthrow the power of God.

And here is the ultimate paradox of the Christian life... to move forward, you must stand still. To journey, you stay home. To voyage, leave your sails down, anchor in place and the rudder locked...

For many years, I have struggled with the conflicting messages the Church frequently sends regarding Lent. It’s a spiritual journey pilgrimage sort of thing, going out, finding new spirituality to explore... or it’s a retreat, pulling back away to prepare for the passion and death of Jesus. What does it mean to both retreat and pilgrim at the same time?

I think today’s Gospel moves me much closer to a resolution of this inherent tension. Well, that, plus rocks. Because, you see, pilgrims both ancient and modern have a tradition of carrying rocks along with them representing their prayers and intentions for the pilgrimage, and at the end or along the way, deposit them on cairns as way of releasing the prayer to God or a symbol of the completed pilgrimage.

Our responsibility as ‘standing still pilgrims’ is to pick up the rocks of our community and carry them away to God. The pain and hurt of the souls around us. To heal and exorcise. The rocks weighing them down become the things we can carry. Because, you see, a “spiritual journey” does not know what to do with pain. It does not know what to do with the murder of 49 people in New Zealand. It does not know what to do with a school shooting. It does not know what to do with cancer. It does not know what to do with a broken marriage or a broken heart or broken people. It simply gives you another rock, possibly in the shape of a heart.

But pilgrims do. We know to carry the rock away, and give it God at the pilgrim cairn at the foot of the cross. We know that as we journey and walk, to make relationship and share in pain. To be wandering priests. Have we done this? Are we carrying the rocks of our neighbors? When we pray, do we seek God’s protection for those whose worship is not our own? Do we seek God’s justice for those hurt and exploited by those in power? Do we call out for mercy for the condemned? What are the rocks you are carrying? Are you willing to give it up? Are we willing to carry it for you?

Percy Fawcett was another kind of journey-maker, albeit much different from Ms. Roberts’. An explorer, surveyor and member of the Royal Geographic Society, he served as one of the inspiration for Indiana Jones. A bit eccentric and inspired by Theosophy, he became convinced and obsessed with the idea of a lost city deep in the Amazon rainforest. On April 20, 1925,

Fawcett, along with his son and son's best friend, set out into the forest. A month later, Fawcett's wife received a letter detailing the location of 'Dead Horse Camp,' a site across the river from the unexplored Xingu valley in Brazil. Fawcett, his son, and his son's friend, were never heard from again.

Were they killed by native tribes or succumb to hunger and disease? Or had they found their city? And stayed? Rescue expeditions found no evidence, and various rumors of sightings continued.

And maybe this is our final image of pilgrimage, of going off and not returning. Through the power of Jesus Christ working in us, of keeping close to the example of the apostles, to take away the rocks and the sickness and demons of our community, and disappear in the wildness of God's love.

Eat, so that you can walk. Pray, so that you can carry. Love so that others will be changed and shaped by the love that has saved us all.

Amen.